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GANDHISM IN ACTION

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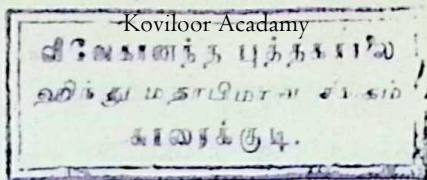
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GANDHISM IN ACTION

"Not to kill, but to be killed" is the slogan of Gandhism in action.

"Stuff and nonsense" is, of course, the cry of the uninitiated. It is beyond the reach of their understanding.

Even Bernard Shaw, the author of that mighty and sublime play, *Man and Superman* allows himself to remark that centuries of non-violence of the cow has not converted the tiger to vegetarianism. It is only a slip of his great mind in an unguarded moment. For, he certainly knows that the cow and the tiger case is no parallel to that of Gandhi *versus* Barnard Shaw. In the one case, the difference is of kind and in the other it is of degree. The ferocious nature of the tiger is once for all fixed ; it admits of no correction. But to say that Shavian ferocity, too, is so fixed is to deny human nature its essential element of magnatimity and sympathy. Shaw will be the first to take up the cudgel against that outrageous denial. He himself says somewhere :—"As Man grows through the ages, he finds himself bolder by the growth of his *spirit* (if I may so name the unknown) and dares more and more to love and trust instead of to fear and fight."

You take any war, and see whether the violence of one party has not increased the violence of the other. This process of ever-increasing violence goes on until the final breakdown occurs. In the end what do you find, but a hopeless wreckage of both the victorious and the vanquished? The War of 1914 is still having its vengeance on humanity. England, the victor, finds herself almost level with Germany in

the gutter. This is a lesson mankind cannot afford to forget without fatal consequences.

Human nature even in its debased condition has not lost its power to respond sympathetically to good influences. Only, the persons who supply those influences must be strong-willed. Success may not attend the first few attempts. Victory is certain in the end. Strong-willed men are only made stronger by defeats. This is no casuistry; but the experience of every one who has fought through adversity to prosperity. The brute-ridden man may strike you on the other cheek also when you turn it, once, twice, thrice; but it requires unredeemable pessimism on one's part not to hope that the man will soon become ashamed of himself. Have we not seen the worst of rowdies turn into the best of citizens when rightly tackled?

Devil's Disciples

Even now there are not people wanting whose recipe for peace is war. The slogan of the Allies in the Great War was that. Their war, they proclaimed, was to end war for all time. That contains the implication of the popular belief that a rake turns out the best of husbands. Examples of that magic process are snatched out from here and there. In the same way the Allies may point to Germany, lying bleeding and broken and keeping the peace. But the truth is Germany is nursing her post-war wounds with an ever-growing hatred. No war can end war. The Devil may prove it possible with the aid of his great intellectual charm; but we cannot adopt his methods without becoming his ardent disciples. To pit violence against violence is not to break the vicious circle but to widen it.

Violence does not stop with itself. It creates a long trail of vindictive activities. In one sense its aftermath is more terrible and calculated to provoke greater hostility in

future. Let us again look at the results of the Great War. The victors imposed heavy fetters on Germany in the shape of reparations, knowing fully well that it would not be possible for Germany to pay even a tithe of it. That was done in a vindictive spirit. In their blindness they thought that by making Germany a cripple they would grow from strength to strength. But within a decade they found themselves going the way of Germany. The position is beautifully summed up by Bernard Shaw thus:—

“When wolves combine to kill a horse, the death of the horse only sets them fighting one another for the choicest morsels. Men are no better than wolves if they have no better principles ; accordingly, we find that the Armistice and the Treaty have not extricated us from the war..... We have no principles left, not even commercial ones ; for what sane commercialist would decree that France must not pay for her failure to defend her own soil ; that Germany must pay for her success in carrying the war into the enemy's country ; and that as Germany has not the money to pay, and under our commercial system can make it only by becoming once more a commercial competitor of England and France, which neither of them will allow, she must borrow the money from England, or America, or even from France ; an arrangement by which the victorious creditors will pay one another and wait to get their money back until Germany is either strong enough to refuse to pay or ruined beyond the possibility of paying ?”

We are actually seeing now how that war-born vindictiveness is scattering disaster on all sides.

Where Militarism Fails

Where militarism has failed Gandhism has succeeded : that is, violence exhausts and beats down its own user, whereas Gandhism makes its exponent stronger and stronger

by its use. The militarist fears defeat, because it is more dangerous for him to lose than to win, and so he fights desperately not out of strength but out of cowardice. But with a Satyagrahi it is all different. Defeat has no terror for him; he takes it as his way to success. He has no need to lose his human nature and become a brute, because he is using soul-force and not brute-force, and the expression on his face is one of divine cheer. If there is bloodshed, it is his own blood that flows, and he allows it to flow without the least anger and hatred. And when the fight ends, do you meet with any unpleasant and painful aftermath? No. He has no crimson memories to hug and nurse: the very nature of his creed rules them out. As for his opponent, if human nature is not completely dead in him, he feels ashamed; and that is good for his soul.

Do not think even for a moment that it all sounds well in theory, and in practice the whole thing may end in utter failure. If you take that sceptic view, you will be making the blunder of your life. Gandhism has many victories to its credit. It is no longer a theory couched in vague phrases; but a full-blooded fact kicking every non-believer in the face.

The Flaming Sword

When a frail, young man from India set foot in South Africa in 1893, who thought he was going to prove to the world that there dwells in men a mysterious force, before which the armed strength of soldiers must collapse sooner or later? That force he called the soul-force,—the flaming sword which reduces the iron sword of violence to ashes in a flash. Little did the world think that in his fight against an insolently armed might he was creating that flaming sword. When at last it flashed across its eyes, the world became a little dazed, believing and not believing in it. The lily had turned into the sword! A miracle, indeed!

But that is a miracle every man and woman is capable of. It takes place the moment a man reaches the highest pitch of his internal resisting power. The process of electric lighting gives a clue to that miracle. In that process is involved a great quantity of highly susceptible copper wire, which, though gorges itself with electricity, gives out no light. But here and there occurs a scrap, so stubborn and resistant that it firmly grapples with the current and turns it for our use into light and heat. To a great extent man is like the copper wire, feeble and ineffective. But now and then he becomes terrible and rises to unexpected heights ! How does it happen ? He stiffens and becomes intensely resistant : in other words, he steels his heart with a determination, at which point his real strength and courage come out.

The Boer Oppression

Some four decades ago, Indian settlers in South Africa were being trodden down as worms by the Whites. They were utterly helpless against the aggressors. Inhuman disabilities were imposed on them. They were treated worse than the untouchable classes were ever treated by our orthodox people. They were segregated to outskirts of cities as something loathsome. At every turn they were blackguarded and bullied. In one word, there were made to feel as if they were not human beings. And they seemed incapable of even the proverbial *turn* of the worm.

With their genius for patience and suffering they went on living like draught animals, taking all the kickings as part of their fate. When Mahatma Gandhi arrived there, he saw what was going on, and the infamy of the Whites' callousness passed into his soul like red-hot iron. He immediately set to organise his countrymen and began to stir up their almost dead instincts. He lit their darkened souls. With a new life surging in them, they felt themselves different from what

they were. In their hitherto *copper-wire* being there appeared a luminosity—an urge to resist and conquer tyranny.

Their war began. It was a unique war. Not in the least armed in the weapon of violence but most terribly armed with the weapon of soul-force, the whole Indian community marched behind their great general. Even women and children were shot dead. That was the soldiery of Gen. Smuts, the most inveterate enemy of the Asiatics. But no amount of violence would intimidate the Satyagrahis.

The Great Fight

Rev. J. H. Holmes has graphically described that terrific battle for equitable, political and social recognition. He says :—

“It was a struggle fought from beginning to end with the weapons of passive resistance or non-resistance. Not once in all the years of the protracted struggle was there resort to violence or yielding to the temptation of retaliation and revenge.

“Acting as the leader and counsellor of his people, Gandhi founded a settlement in the open country, just outside the city of Durban. Here he gathered the Indians, placed them on the land for self-support, and bound them by the solemn vow of poverty. Here for years these organised thousands of resisters, suffering constant deprivation and frequent outrage, carried on their struggle against the Government. It was in essence, I suppose, a strike, a withdrawal of the Indians from labour in the towns and villages, and a paralysis, therefore, of the industrial and social life of the republic. It was such a strike as Moses declared in ancient Egypt when he led the Israelites out of the land of Pharaoh into the vast reaches of the wilderness. But this strike, if it may be so called, was in one thing different from any previous strike in human history ! Universally in movements of this kind, the resisters make it

their business to take quick and sharp advantage of any difficulty into which their opponents may fall, and press their claim the harder for this advantage. Gandhi, however, took the opposite course. Whenever, in these years of struggle the Government became embarrassed by unexpected troubles, Gandhi, instead of pushing the fight ruthlessly to victory, would call a truce and come to the succour of the enemy. In 1899, for instance, the Boer War broke out. Gandhi immediately called off his strike, and organised an Indian Red Cross unit, which served throughout the war, was twice mentioned in dispatches, and was publicly thanked for bravery under fire. In 1904, there came a visitation of the plague in Johannesburg. Instantly, the strike was "off," and Gandhi was busying himself in organizing a hospital in the pest-ridden city. In 1906 there was a native rebellion in Natal. Again the strike was suspended, while Gandhi raised and personally led a corps of stretcher-bearers, whose work was dangerous and painful. On this occasion he was publicly thanked by the Governor of Natal—and shortly afterwards, on the resumption of the resistant movement, thrown into a common jail in Johannesburg. It would be impossible for me to tell here the indignities and cruelties which were visited upon Gandhi during these years of intermittent resistance and forgiveness. He was thrown into prison countless times, placed in solitary confinement, bound hand and foot to the bars of his cage. He was again and again set upon by raging mobs, beaten into insensibility and left for dead by the side of the road. When not outraged in this fashion, he was insulted in public, mortified and humiliated with the most exquisite pains. But nothing shook his courage, disturbed his equanimity, exhausted his patience, or poisoned his love and forgiveness of his foes. And at last, after twenty years of trial and suffering, he won the victory. In 1913, the Indian case was taken up by Lord Hardinge, and an Imperial Commission reported in Gandhi's favour on nearly all the points at issue, and an Act was passed giving official recognition to his claims. I know of no more astonishing illustration of a battle won doing no wrong, committing no violence, but simply enduring without resentment all the punishment the enemy can inflict until at last he becomes weary and ashamed of punishment."

First Trial in India

It was not long after his final agreement with the South African Government, that India had the first opportunity to witness Gandhism in battle-field. The Champaran district (in the north-western corner of Bihar and Orissa) was the theatre of operation. Here the fight was quick and decisive. It was a case of : he came, and saw and conquered.

Now let us have a look into the history lying behind this Satyagraha. The Champaran district covers an area of 3531 square miles with a population of about 19 lakhs. Only 2 per cent. of the population live in towns and the rest live in villages. For efficient management of the Bettiah Raj the estate (2,000 sq. miles) was divided into small parts and leased out. In the earlier days all lessees were Indians and they had been there from before 1,793. Later on Europeans engaged in indigo and sugar-cane cultivation began to take leases. In course of time the whole of the district became honey-combed with European factories, and more than half of the district passed into the possession of European lessees.

These indigo factories soon became factories to grind the peasantry into abject slavery. This tyranny of the planters has been graphically described by an Englishman himself. Giving evidence before a commission inquiring into the grievances of the indigo tenants of Bengal in 1860, Mr. E. W. L. Tower, at one time Magistrate of Faridpur, stated :—

"There is one thing more. I wish to state that considerable odium has been thrown on the Missionaries for saying that 'Not a chest of indigo reached England without being stained with human blood.' That has been stated to be an anecdote. That expression is mine, and I adopt it in the fullest and broadest sense of its meaning as the result of my experience as Magistrate in the Faridpur District. I have seen several ryots sent in to me as Magistrate who have been speared through the body. I have had ryots before me who have been shot down by Mr. Forde (a planter). I have put on record, how others have been first speared and then

kidnapped, and such a system of carrying on indigo. I consider to be a system of bloodshed."

The condition of the tenants of Champaran did not much differ from that of the Bengal tenants. The contract which the tenants were made to enter with the planters regarding indigo was not 'voluntarily accepted by them but they were coerced. They had to give their 'valuable time to the cultivation of indigo while it could have been more profitably employed in growing other crops. Their best lands were taken up for indigo-growing. Sometimes even land on which another crop was growing used to be taken up for indigo-growing and the standing crop destroyed.

Tenants in Mutiny

That state of affairs could not long continue without driving the tenants to mutiny. The first disturbance of which any record is available was in 1867. It started in one factory. The tenants refused to grow indigo and sowed other crops on indigo lands. Other villages followed. This mutiny caused a great consternation amongst the planters. Indigo cultivation was stopped in a way and it seemed as if it would disappear altogether from Champaran. But it was not to be. As was desired by planters a Small Cause Court of two Judges was established by the Government on the scene of disturbance to speedily dispose of cases instituted by planters for recovery of damages from the tenants for breach of their indigo contracts. The result was that the efforts of the helpless tenants to get rid of the indigo octopus failed.

The bleeding of the tenants was resumed and it went on till 1917, when Mahatma Gandhi appeared on the scene.

Gandhiji was acquainted with the condition of the Champaran tenants at the thirty-first Session of the Congress held at Lucknow in December 1916. It was the desire of the peasants that he should visit Champaran and see with his own eyes the pitiable condition of its people and devise means for improving it. But owing to pre-occupation with other matters Gandhiji could undertake the tour only in April 1917. On the 9th he arrived at Patna and on the 11th he saw the Secretary of the Planters' Association, explained to him the

object of his visit and asked for his help in his inquiry. The next day the Secretary wrote to Gandhiji saying that no inquiry was needed and advised him not to go to Champaran. The same day Gandhiji saw the Commissioner of the Tirhoot division. The Commissioner expressed his disapproval of Gandhiji's visit; he also told him that inquiry was being made on behalf of the Government; that his visit was unnecessary, that he would not give any assistance to him in his inquiry and finally advised him to go away.

The anxiety of the planters and the officials to get him away only deepened his suspicion that there must be something rotten, and his determination to go into the matter became stronger. Gandhiji asked some prominent delegates to the Lucknow Congress to give him a letter to the effect that they and some other delegates from Bihar had requested him at the Congress to hold an inquiry into Champaran. Along with this letter he sent a letter of his own to the Commissioner saying that he had come to find out the truth with regard to the relationship existing between planters and the ryots in view of certain statements which had been made to him. That was the only object of his visit and all that he wanted was peace with honour.

Mahatmaji proceeded with his work. A large number of tenants came to him, and he listened to their story. He had not up to this time formed any idea as to the true situation in Champaran and at times it seemed that he was not inclined to believe all that he was told. He used sometimes to ask, "Is it possible? Can this be true?"

Prohibitory Order

On the 14th April he started for Champaran. On his way he visited several villages inquiring after their conditions. Then he was served with a notice as follows:—

"Whereas it has been made to appear to me from the letter of the Commissioner of the Division, copy of which is attached to this order, that your presence in any part of the district will endanger the public peace and may lead to serious disturbance which may be accompanied by loss of life and whereas urgency is of the utmost importance

"Now therefore I do hereby order you to abstain from remaining in the District, which you are required to leave by the next available train."

Mahatmaji sent the following reply to the Magistrate :—

"With reference to the order under Section 144, Criminal Procedure Code, just served upon me, I beg to state that I am sorry that you have felt called upon to issue it and I am sorry too, that the Commissioner of the Division has totally misinterpreted my position. Out of a sense of public responsibility, I feel it to be my duty to say that I am unable to leave the District, but if it so pleases the authorities, I shall submit to the order by suffering the penalty of disobedience.

"I must emphatically repudiate the Commissioner's suggestion that my object is likely to be agitation. My desire is purely and simply for a genuine search for knowledge. And this I shall continue to satisfy so long as I am free."

Mr. H. S. Polak, Pandit Malaviya, Mr. Rajendra Prasad and some other leaders were informed of what had happened by telegram and Mr. Andrews was asked to come at once.

Mahatmaji also prepared a number of directions for the guidance of those who were to carry on the work after him.

The next day the inquiry began. Such a large number of tenants had come that gentlemen who were recording the statements had not even a moment's rest throughout the day.

When no summons was received up to the evening about any charge of disobedience of orders, Mahatmaji wrote a letter to the Dt. Magistrate intimating to him his intention of visiting a neighbouring village. He also told the Magistrate that he did not intend doing anything secretly. It would therefore be better, if a police officer accompanied him. Immediately on receipt of this letter the Magistrate wrote to him that he would be charged with an offence under Section 188, I. P. C., that a summons would be issued against him and that the Magistrate hoped that Gandhiji would not leave Motihari. Shortly after this letter was received the summons also came calling upon Gandhiji to appear before the Sub-Divisional officer on the 18th April.

Surprise for the Court

The eyes of all India from one end to the other were now turned towards Champaran. At quarter past 12, on the 18th, Mahatmaji started for the Court. Although no information had been given to the tenants about the proceedings under Section 144 and subsequent prosecution, yet the news had somehow reached not only every corner of the town but even distant villages and several thousand tenants had assembled in the Court compound and were waiting for Gandhiji from 10 o'clock.

The Government pleader opened the case and stated that under orders issued under Section 144, Mr. Gandhi ought to have left Champaran on the night of the 16th April, but that he had not done so and he was consequently charged with an offence under Section 188, I.P.C.

Mahatmaji then made the following statement :—

"I have entered the country with motives of rendering humanitarian and national service. I have done so in response to a pressing invitation to come and help the ryots, who urge they are not being fairly treated by the indigo planters. I could not render any help without studying the problem. I have, therefore, come to study it with the assistance, if possible, of the administration and the planters. I have no other motive and cannot believe that my coming can, in any way, disturb public peace and cause loss of life. I claim to have considerable experience in such matters. The administration have, however, thought differently. I fully appreciate their difficulty and I admit, too, that they can only proceed upon information they receive. As a law-abiding citizen my first instinct would be, as it was, to obey the order served upon me. But I could not do so without doing violence to my sense of duty to those for whom I came. I feel that I could just now serve them only by remaining in their midst. I could not therefore voluntarily retire. Amidst this conflict of duty I could only throw the responsibility of removing me from them on the administration. I am fully conscious of the fact, holding in the public life of India a position such as I do, I have to be most careful in setting examples. It is my firm belief that in the complex constitution under which we are living, the only safe and honourable course for a

self-respecting man is, in the circumstances such as face me, to do what I have decided to do, that is, to submit without protest to the penalty of disobedience."

First Victory

The Magistrate could not make up his mind as to what to do next. He repeatedly asked Mahatmaji, if he pleaded guilty. Gandhiji's reply was, "I have said whatever I have to say in my statement." The Magistrate said that it did not contain a clear plea of guilty. Mahatmaji thereupon, said: "I do not wish to waste the time of the Court and I plead guilty." This put out the Magistrate still further. He told Mahatmaji, "If you leave the district now and promise not to return, the case against you would be withdrawn." Mahatmaji replied: "That cannot be. Not to speak of this time alone, I shall make Champaran my home even after my return from jail."

The Magistrate was dumb-founded and could only say that the matter required consideration and that he would pass orders at 3 o'clock. At 3 the Magistrate told him that he would pass orders on the 21st, but that he would release him in the meantime on a bail of Rs. 100. Mahatmaji said that he had no bailer and could not offer bail. The Magistrate was again in difficulty and found a way out by offering him to release him on his personal recognisance.

In the meanwhile Messrs. Polak and Andrews and some others had arrived. The recording of statements of the tenants was resumed.

On the 20th, Mr. Andrews saw the Collector, and he learnt that the case against Mahatmaji would be withdrawn and the Government officers would help him in the inquiry. The next morning a notice was received that the case had been withdrawn.

Mahatmaji and his assistants visited several villages, saw the conditions of the tenants and recorded their statements.

Gandhiji's activities spread consternation amongst the planters. They waited upon the Government in a deputation, as a result of which, a telegram was received by Mahatmaji

on 6th May from the Chief Secretary to the Government informing him that the Hon'ble Mr. W. Maude, a member of the Government, would be going to Patna on the 10th and requesting him to meet him there.

On the 10th Mahatmaji had an interview with Mr. Maude. As a result of the interview, Gandhiji submitted to the Government a report containing the preliminary conclusion he had arrived at regarding the agrarian conditions.

On the 29th of May Mahatmaji was summoned by the Government to Ranchi. He went there and interviewed the Governor on the 4th June as fixed. The outcome of this discussion was the appointment of a committee by the Government with Gandhiji as one of the members.

The Committee, after an elaborate inquiry, submitted recommendations for the abolition of the prevailing system. Accordingly the Government took the necessary action, and the planters' tyranny was at an end.

By a single refusal to do the will of the thoughtless officials, Gandhiji brought about the destruction of the Indigo Octopus.

Following this, there were numerous instances of Gandhism in action ; and the result was such as to bring home the value of Satyagraha as a reforming influence in all spheres of action and several thoughtful people, even in the West, are now inclined to the view that it forms the best alternative to war. Numerous devout Christians have also recognised how closely Gandhism is associated with the teachings of Jesus, in particular his advice : Resist not evil.

(SECOND EDITION)